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**Testimony to the Michigan House Great Lakes and Environment Committee**

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I am providing testimony today on House Bills 4677 and 4678, the proposal to fund the Michigan state parks with a fee attached to motor vehicle registrations.

Defense of Place is an organization dedicated to ensuring the perpetual protection of parks, open spaces and wildlife refuges. We strongly support the importance of parks for the well being of our communities and our environment. ([www.defenseofplace.org](http://www.defenseofplace.org)) Unfortunately, we have seen too often that starving parks of much needed funding leads to privatization and ultimately the sale of parkland.

On the surface, the plan to fund parks with an optional driver's license fee seems reasonable but there are some fundamental flaws with this approach that raise concern for the long-term viability of the park system. The proposed fee is not an actual user fee – which is both part of its appeal and its downfall. Attaching a fee to a targeted group of Michigan citizens will likely have the opposite effect of what the bills' supporters intend—in the long run it will undermine public support for public parks. As people adjust to the proposed fee structure, they will no longer recognize that access to parks is a right of all citizens and will feel that they are the responsibility only of those who have taken on the burden of paying for them.

The State of Michigan must recognize its essential governmental role and obligation to perpetually support Michigan's state parks. This has been true during other bad economic times and it is true today. When a group of Michiganders is asked to volunteer to privately donate to fund the parks, it puts into question the true public nature of the park system.

All of Michigan's state parks belong to all of the people, for all time. Generations before us understood that commitment when they acquired and designated these lands as public parks, sometimes at great expense and sacrifice to themselves. The act of creating a park is a pact with future generations. It's up to all of us to reaffirm that commitment as a State and not require that of only a subset of our citizens.

Putting the entire burden of supporting the park system on a smaller group of Michigan citizens is a step on the path to privatization. This type of "opt out" fee attached to driver's licenses has neither been tested by the courts nor proved to be successful over time in other states. Instead of pursuing this relatively unproven system, Michigan should look to other states like Missouri whose sales-tax supported system has proved successful over a longer period. If this funding plan fails, what is the public to think next? If owners of some Michigan vehicles fail to privately donate enough money to the state park system, what will the fate of our park system be then?

Privatization forces are vocal and will not stop calling for greater privatization of Michigan parks. The path to privatization often follows the same pattern: supporters of privatization distrust government's ability to carry out important public services like parks maintenance, they call for private takeover of these services, while at the same time pushing for decreases in parks budgets, insisting that parks should "pay for themselves," and when that fails the obvious solution to them is private ownership. The State has already gone partly down this road and resorted to the sale of state parkland, such as at Bald Mountain and Proud Lake State Recreation Areas.

I want to commend you for your efforts to find adequate funding for Michigan's park system. However, I must encourage you to look further for a more equitable long term funding solution. We must find a way to fund our state park system with public dollars from all the people of the state. Keep the park system firmly in the public trust.